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ABSTRACT

To identify reasons for peer evaluation of college teaching being more honored in rhetoric than in practice, events that occurred on the campus of a prominent public research university are described and suggestions offered as to why peer evaluation is not often practiced. A Committee on Teaching Effectiveness was appointed in response to complaints about faculty review. The Committee issued a report that called for more varied evidence about teaching performance including student ratings, student exit interviews, and peer review. When the Committee's recommendations were disseminated to the faculty, 23 faculty members wrote letters of protest raising objections on the basis of potential divisiveness, ineffectiveness among tenured faculty, academic freedom, and fundamental professorial prerogatives. A general faculty meeting was held but no action taken for lack of a quorum. It may be concluded that characteristics of faculty governance designed to prevent small, vocal groups from having too much influence may actually stifle debate and cause unnecessary divisiveness. Further, influential and outspoken faculty regard peer review of teaching as incompatible with academic freedom despite the common practice of peer review of scholarship. In addition, faculty define peer review too narrowly. Successful peer evaluation procedures should be sure to accommodate these points. Four references are included. (JB)

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Why Hasn't Peer Evaluation of College Teaching Caught On?

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I believe that peer evaluation of teaching is more honored in rhetoric than in practice. To identify explanations for this situation, I will describe events that occurred over the past year on the campus of a prominent public research university. Although nameless here, it is a university where I have trusted informants and where these events are documented by an extensive paper trail. Based on this case, I will suggest some answers to the question, "Why hasn't peer evaluation of college teaching caught on?"

On this particular campus, peer evaluation of teaching is rare. Only one or two departments have had regular, organized peer review activities in recent years. Meanwhile, concern was increasing about a related issue. Professors expressed concern that course evaluations from students were being weighed too heavily in faculty reviews. As a result of this concern, the Faculty Senate appointed a Committee on Teaching Effectiveness.

The Committee Report

After some months of study, the committee issued a report that emphasized the need for more varied evidence about teaching performance, including not only student ratings of courses but also student exit interviews and peer reviews. The recommendation about peer evaluation was most controversial. The topic of peer review was addressed in the first of the committee's seven recommendations:

Based on a presentation at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, 1991.

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Each department on campus should have in place a systematic method of evaluating the teaching of all its faculty. This systematic method should include, but not necessarily be limited to the following:

a) student course evaluations to assess the clarity of lectures, the quality of student-teacher interaction, how well the course was organized, and the extent to which students believe they have learned what the course was designed to teach;

b) peer review by faculty colleagues to assess how well the faculty member is meeting the course objectives, the relationship of subject matter being taught to the purpose of the course, and the appropriateness of grading methods used; and

c) exit surveys from graduating students or recent alumni to assess the course and/or instructors who made the greatest impact on them while they were completing the course requirements in their major.

This recommendation also pointed out "a definite need for faculty to become more involved in the evaluation of their colleagues' teaching. Faculty peers can help determine how well a course fits within the entire curriculum and they can review the consistency and clarity of course syllabi, course objectives, and exam content. Presentation style as well as faculty-student rapport can be assessed by actually attending class sessions." Appended to the report was a description of procedures used for peer review in a department whose chair was a member of the committee.

The Legislative Journey

The committee's full report went to the Faculty Senate, the initial step in a long journey that all faculty legislation on that campus must follow. After the Faculty Senate, legislation goes to the University Council, whose members include administrators as well as professors who are members of the Senate. Upon favorable action by the University Council, legislation is sent by mail to all faculty members (the "general faculty"), who on that campus number about 2500. Faculty objecting to the legislation are invited to file letters of protest. A sufficient number of protests prompts a meeting of the general faculty where action can be taken. Unfortunately, meetings of the general faculty are unlikely to attract a quorum. Although meetings serve the useful purpose of airing faculty views, once action is proposed, attendance must be checked and absence of a quorum forces adjournment. Legislation then typically returns to the University Council. If approved again there, it goes to the President who makes the final decision regarding its disposition.

The Letters of Protest

We now trace the journey of recommendations from the Faculty Senate Committee on Teaching Effectiveness. The recommendations passed the Faculty Senate by an overwhelming vote. They went next to the University Council, which approved them. Then they were sent to all members of the faculty. Faculty members submitted twenty-three letters of protest, enough to require a meeting of the general faculty.

The protest letters revealed a number of concerns about peer review. The following excerpts convey the content and tone of those letters.

A Professor of Civil Engineering believes that peer evaluation will be divisive:

> I do not agree with peer observation, because they [sic] will be controversial and detrimental to the entire process of teaching evaluation.

A Professor of Mathematics argues that peer evaluation will not distinguish differences in teaching quality:

> Peer review is also of doubtful use when it comes to tenured faculty members reviewing each other--academic courtesy and the respect for latitude in teaching methods is liable to produce uniformly positive results.

A Professor of English suggests that peer evaluation should be voluntary:

> I cannot endorse [the Committee's] recommendation for mandatory peer evaluation of every faculty member. Besides the problem of the enormous expense of time in implementing such a requirement in a large department such as English, there is as well the problem that requisite peer evaluations render faculty, even tenured faculty, vulnerable to possible tyrannical control, not so much by aberrant individuals as by representatives of whatever departmental faction is in power at that time. Since academic freedom (in the most traditional sense) is at risk in the legislation of the University Council, would it not be wiser and healthier to legislate peer evaluation as an option available to any faculty member on a voluntary basis? And would it not be in all of our best interests to legislate, from the start, that the faculty member seeking peer evaluation

must have complete veto power over nominees suggested by any departmental governmental agency.

Another Professor of English raises additional issues of academic freedom:

> I see in these recommendations the potential for abuse, especially with respect to the academic freedom of faculty to design and administer their own courses. The rationale for the recommendation stands to compromise a faculty person's ability to retain what he/she deems suitable material in a course and to evaluate students according to his/her standards of excellence. I am also skeptical about the prospect of having colleagues, who often harbor quite different pedagogical orientations, "determine" for others "how well a course fits within the entire curriculum," let alone pass judgment on "the consistency and clarity of course syllabi, course objectives, and exam content."..... "Presentation style," is highly personal, and "faculty-student rapport" is less important than a professor's standards of excellence. (I proffer this observation, by the way, as a past recipient of a teaching award that places great value on faculty-student rapport.)

Finally, a Professor of Speech Communication contends that the recommendation for peer evaluation undercuts faculty authority in fundamental ways:

> Are we all to teach in the same way dictated by education methodologists? I thought I was hired and tenured at this university because my judgement about my

> field had been supported by my performance and the evaluations of my peers within and without the institution. Is that now to be second-guessed by some strolling visitor? I'm the expert on my field at this university; that is why I am here and why I teach what I do. This proposal seems to me to dangerously flirt with issues of academic freedom and fundamental professorial prerogatives. Is a statewide curriculum manual far behind?

Other letters and informal conversations revealed further concerns. Some writers argued that it would be impossible to reach agreement on standards and criteria for peer review, since consensus on these matters does not exist in the faculty. A protest also came from the department whose procedures were appended to the report, saying that the appended statement did not accurately describe practice in the department.

The General Faculty Meeting

As the general faculty meeting began, it was apparent that enough faculty were present for a good discussion but that they did not constitute a quorum. The first person to address the meeting after the chair invited discussion on the recommendations identified himself as a member of the department whose procedures for peer review were appended to the report. He declared that the department has never done things as described in that statement, that it presently does not do things in that way, and that during the previous week its executive committee had voted that things not be done that way in the future. He concluded by moving that the appendix be deleted from the report. His motion triggered a quorum call. Since the meeting lacked a quorum, it was adjourned.

That was probably the shortest general faculty meeting on record. Certainly it was an unsatisfactory meeting, since early adjournment prevented concerned faculty from discussing the recommendations.

The recommendations continued their legislative journey. They went back to the University Council where they gained approval and were subsequently signed by the President of the University.

Generalizations from the Case

Why recount in such detail events which are unique to one campus? I believe that important lessons can be learned from this case. If we attend to the legislative process and to the objections raised by faculty, I believe we can derive some explanations about why peer evaluation of teaching is not more widely practiced.

One reason that peer evaluation of teaching is not more common involves the characteristics of faculty governance and of those who participate in it. At many colleges and universities, governance is thought to be controlled by a small but vocal minority who are sometimes regarded with suspicion by their colleagues. Legislative checks and balances may be installed so that an unrepresentative minority does not prevail, but, as we have seen, those procedures are likely to be cumbersome and may actually stifle rather than stimulate debate. The procedures themselves may cause unnecessary divisiveness even when something as potentially beneficial to faculty as peer evaluation is under discussion.

A second reason that peer evaluation of teaching has not caught on is that a number of influential and outspoken faculty view it as incompatible with academic freedom. I am alarmed at the ease with which the banner of academic freedom was raised in faculty letters of protest, especially since peer review of scholarship is widely practiced without such objections.

To be sure, peer evaluation of teaching differs from peer review of scholarship in important ways. Teaching is typically reviewed by one's day-to-day associates, while scholarship is evaluated by anonymous members of invisible colleagues. Many faculty regard teaching as highly personal, and they feel more vulnerable when their teaching is critiqued than when their scholarship is criticized. The evaluation of teaching, compared with the evaluation of scholarship, is regarded as subjective, with questionable reliability and validity. But we rarely address these issues directly. We ignore evidence of the low reliability of peer judgments about scholarship (Cicchetti, 1991). And we fail to take reasonable steps to increase the reliability of peer judgments about teaching, such as standardizing procedures and training judges. In short, we need to examine parallels between peer evaluation of teaching and peer evaluation of scholarship and explore the implications of each for academic freedom.

Third, peer evaluation of teaching may not have caught on because faculty define it so narrowly. In this case, despite the committee's broad view, many faculty apparently took *teaching* to refer to what happens in the classroom. They took *evaluation* to refer to what one can observe in the classroom. They took *peer* to refer to senior faculty who have formal evaluative roles. I recommend a wider perspective. Teaching should encompass instructional planning and instructional assessment, as well as classroom performance, and it should encompass all classroom and nonclassroom activities that are intended to stimulate student learning.

The costs of classroom visitation for purposes of summative evaluation are high, which suggests that the appropriate role for colleagues is to review course materials rather than to observe classroom performance (Scriven, 1981, 1988). Evaluation of classroom performance may well be left to properly

interpreted student evaluations or to specialists who are trained as observers. Faculty might better devote their time to examining syllabi, assignments, exams, and samples of graded work. Also relevant are reports from students about their course-related activities outside the classroom and their relations with faculty in co-curricular activities, all of which fit a broad definition of teaching.

In the university described here, peer evaluation was stimulated by faculty-initiated legislation. There are other ways, of course, that peer evaluation of teaching might be initiated. A chief academic officer might refuse to consider recommendations for salary, promotion, and tenure unless they are accompanied by evidence establishing teaching effectiveness, including evidence gathered by peers. Evaluation procedures are likely to be quickly formulated following such administrative action. On a smaller scale, a single department might take the initiative. A department can establish a successful peer evaluation system if its members trust one another and if they demonstrate positive regard for teaching.

Conclusion

Scholarly literature provides few examples of research-based activities where teaching performance is comprehensively and systematically evaluated by colleagues for formative or summative purposes (Cohen, 1991), but that situation need not deter exploratory efforts.

Whether peer evaluation of teaching is initiated by faculty legislation, by administrative fiat, or by departmental action, success is more likely when the three points raised above are accommodated. That is, any program for peer review should secure faculty endorsement without unnecessarily complex governance procedures, should develop procedures that expressly address

faculty concerns about academic freedom, and should encompass more than colleagues' observation of classroom performance.

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